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Deception Managers

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Aug. 5 — "Deception management" is the term of art applied to the decade-long campaign by Soviet officials to persuade American intelligence evaluators that the Soviet Union is not violating arms control agreements.

The first inkling of duplicity came to us in May 1972 via "Gamma Guppy," our tuning-in to limousine telephone conversations between Leonid Brezhnev, Andrei Gromyko and Soviet missile designers at the Moscow summit conference.

These transcripts quoted Mr. Brezhnev talking about a "main missile" that had never been mentioned in SALT negotiations, which turned out to be the SS-19. The surprised Henry Kissinger considered this "sharp practice," but not a treaty violation. Adm. Bobby Inman, first at N.S.A. and now at C.I.A., obeys an old order to withhold these conversations from intelligence community analysis. The admiral, who startled his aides by biabbing about sources and methods on late-night TV, has waged a vendetta against David Sullivan, a C.I.A. analyst who dared quote from them in a 1978 SALT verification study, which is called "the report that never was."

The next inkling of deception management came with the realization in 1978 that American intelligence estimates of the "circular error probable" had been shockingly wrong. Soviet missiles were far more accurate than the C.I.A.'s Ray McCrory had been led to believe: the 300 SS-18 missiles alone, each with 10 warheads, could destroy our 1,000 land-based Minuteman missiles. That is when we began to hear about "the window of vulnerability," which came nearer on each analysis.

A third piece of evidence about systematic deception surfaced with what former Defense Intelligence chief Daniel Graham last week called "the most serious" breach of U.S. security in recent years: the theft of the operation manual of the KH-11 spy satellite. We had induced the Russians to think our KH-11 was an innocent communications satellite, treating it differently from our spies in the sky, but it carried a high-resolution camera. The Russians thought it was safe to cheat under KH-11; when they obtained the manual, the cheating stopped.

Soviet deception managers must know our surveillance capacity, but occasionally we get a break: a careless Russian radar operator made it possible for us to discover that enormous radar facilities supposedly to be used only for "early warning" were really battle-management ABM radar, an egregious treaty violation.

Other evidence of deception management: when an anthrax epidemic broke out near Sverdlovsk, we suspected a germ warfare factory in operation, but the Russians will permit no on-site inspection and will give no treaty-required explanations. And when we discovered them encoding some messages from their satellites, introducing the possibility of surprise attack, our softer SALT sellers permitted "non SALT-related encryption," foolishly letting the Russians decide what is "SALT related."

Now that we know that deception management has been the Soviet practice on arms control for the last decade, what is the Reagan Administration doing about it?

Last month, hard-liners urged that the U.S. delegation to the Standing Consultative Commission in Geneva, headed by Brig. Gen. John Lasater, tell a Soviet general, Viktor Starodubov, that we wanted explanations for these obvious Soviet treaty violations before going forward with either Theater Nuclear Force or SALT negotiations, for which the Russians are so eager.

The Russians did not even do us the courtesy of a diplomatic dodge; except where photographic evidence was incontrovertible, they told us to suck our complaints in our ear.

This Soviet stonewalling on SALT has been kept secret because (a) our ally, Chancellor Schmidt, wants to minimize the serious verification issue on SALT, auguring an even more serious verification issue of theater nuclear missiles, which can be hidden on trucks in garages; (b) General Haig does not want to upset Andrei Gromyko before their September meeting in New York; and (c) the Arms Control Agency chief, Eugene Rostow, whose heart is in the right place on the overriding importance of verification, is under pressure from soft-liners at State and C.I.A.

The Russians are not being secretive because they are paranoid; they fight verification because deception management is their game. Realists in the Reagan ranks are hopeful that the resumption of the Verification Panel, abandoned by Carterites, as well as the coming appointment of William Van Cleave as Chairman of the General Advisory Committee of ACDA, will signal a much-needed new perception of deception.